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ABSTRACT

A study extended studies on use of prior learning assessment and recognition (PLAR) by concentrating on learners/students outside of the college system and exploring student experience with all dimensions of the use of PLAR. Fourteen university students were interviewed. Findings indicated respondents had re-entered formal education by novel means based on an individual assessment of what they knew, and had learned, outside the system of formal education, rather than solely on what they had learned within it; most encountered PLAR by accident; PLAR became the primary basis on which they continued in their educational quest, a welcome add-on that eased and enriched their educational experience, or a minor addition; they used all available PLAR devices, though a larger proportion used portfolios than in earlier research, and all respondents were self-directed students in addition to self-directed learners. (Appendixes include 11 references, interview protocol, summary of interviewee responses, and demographic information.) (YLB)

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Dimensions of the Experience of Prior Learning

Assessment & Recognition

Alan Thomas, Monica Collins and Lynette Plett

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Introduction to Study

Despite nearly forty years of experience with PLAR, throughout the world, until a decade ago one would have sought, mostly in vain, for research devoted to its development and characteristics. Fortunately, in the last decade that has changed, particularly in Canada. Beginning with the two surveys of the use of PLAR in Canada (Thomas, 1989; Isabelle, 1994), we have seen the emergence of increasingly systematic exploration. Of special note are the impressive, *A Slice of the Iceberg* (1999) by the Cross Canada Partnership on PLAR, financed by HRDC, coordinated by Joy Van Kleef, and more recently the *The Learners' Perspectives on Prior Learning Assessment* (2000), financed by The British Columbia Ministry of Advanced Education and Technology, the Centre for Curriculum Transfer and Technology, coordinated by Douglas College. In addition there has been a rising number of dissertations devoted to various aspects of PLAR. We have moved from descriptions of educational agencies providing some form of PLAR, whether or not it was called that, to explorations of the volume and experience of students with the use of PLAR.

The present study attempts, modestly, to extend the latter two studies by concentrating on learners/students outside of the College system, and on exploring, in as much depth as possible, the experience of students with all dimensions of the use of PLAR. We are not asking the classic *educational* question, "did you learn what was taught", but the *learning* question, "what did you learn", and particularly "what did you learn about learning, about your learning, and about Education"?

PLAR represents the principal contemporary discourse between Learning and Education, essentially between Learner and Student. Among many other demands, Education insists that the learner who becomes student relinquish his or her right to evaluate his or her own learning. It also insists, to varying degrees, that the student accept the way in which the teacher or teaching agency teaches what is to be learned, and the agency's right to decide when it has been learned and how well. All these familiar procedures are in the interest of turning *private* learning into *public* learning, which then can be acknowledged by the student and the community, and marketed in various ways. The conventional student ascends the educational ladder accepting, usually uncritically, Education's requirements, eventually achieving the goal of possessing *public* knowledge and skill. The PLAR candidate undertakes the additional process of seeking to transform essentially *private* knowledge and skill, acquired through undetermined experience, into *public* learning in order to, eventually, benefit from the advantages associated with the latter. This process involves the candidate's evaluation of the knowledge and skill already achieved without experiencing the other complementary pillar of Formal Education, instruction. The candidate, in the act of transforming himself or herself into a student, is obliged to become self-conscious about learning itself, especially about his or her learning, and the relationship between learning, teaching, and education. Perhaps the most important aspect of the process is that, to however slight a degree, the PLAR user has the experience of negotiating with the Educational system, not as a privilege, but as a right.

We suspect that undertaking the procedure of PLAR creates a different kind of student, with an altered sensibility about the entire process of Education. This sensibility about the process of learning and teaching has the potential to fundamentally affect the historic discourse between Learning and Education. It will do so by means of the

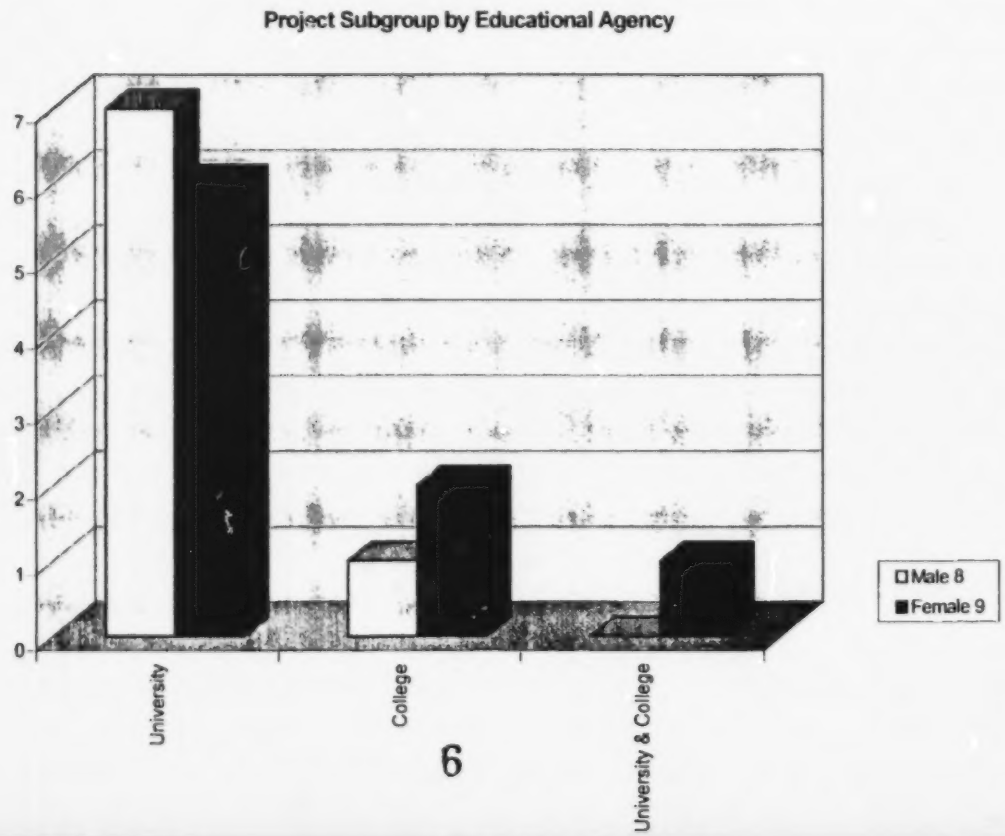
traditional way of altering Education, that is by altering the attitudes and expectations of learners who become students by entering the system by means of the use of PLAR. As a result, the system of Formal Education may become more responsive to diverse styles and venues of learning.

We set out to explore, in depth, the experience of a small number of PLAR users, as a basis for discovering new questions to ask about that experience, and about the meaning of PLAR to Learning, to Education, and to the society in which both are imbedded. The sample is not, in any sense, statistically representative; there is no control group which means that we cannot know whether PLAR attracts people who already possess the attitudes we argue are the result of the process of PLAR itself. Like most of the existing studies, we have not studied people who considered, and then discarded, the use of PLAR. Nevertheless, we believe we have uncovered evidence that Statistics Canada usually describe as "suggestive". Such evidence should not be ignored in future explorations of the meaning of PLAR in perhaps larger and more inclusive dimensions.

Design

Given the scope and depth of the "*Iceberg*" (1999) study of college students, and the similar focus of most of the other research, we were interested in PLAR users other than College students. We were interested in PLAR users in Universities, Apprenticeship, and Secondary School. These areas are more diverse, across, and even within provinces in Canada. Eventually, perhaps because of the limitations of our search, we settled predominantly for university students with fourteen respondents. We also had

Chart 1:



three respondents with college experience, and one with both college and university experience simultaneously. The sample was drawn nationally, with the exception of the Province of Quebec, and was identified with the help of PLAR supervisors across Canada, some of whom conducted the interviews for us. Every participant, with one exception, was interviewed face to face, usually over a period of two hours. The questions, drawn from a protocol developed in cooperation with Joy Van Kleef, reflect some of the questions that had been used with the "*Iceberg*" respondents. The data were gathered roughly during the years 2000 and 2001.

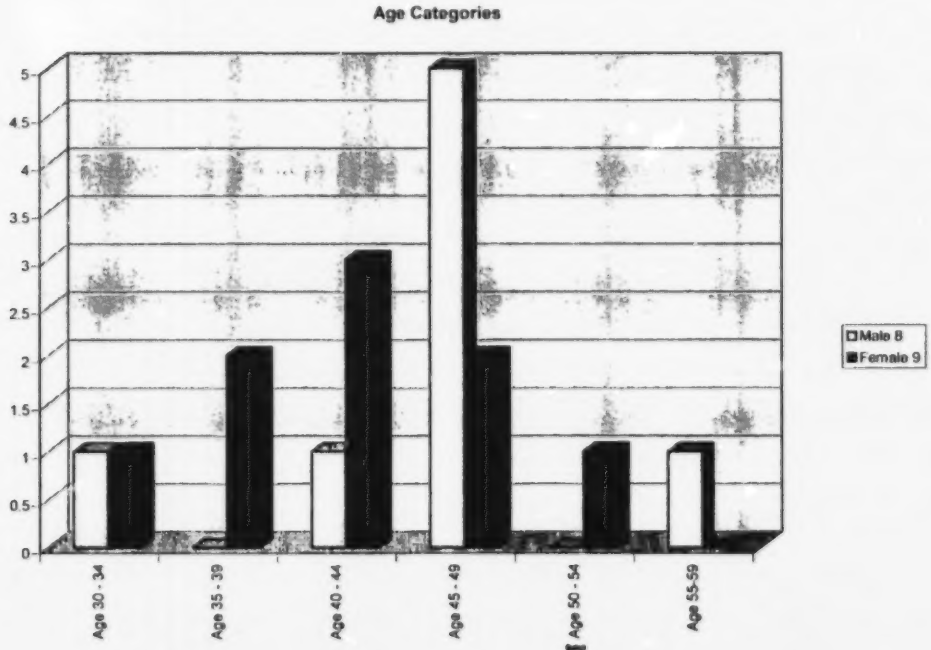
For purposes of simplicity, since it is a lengthy protocol, we have analyzed the responses under four headings: Contact and Initial Stages (Questions 1-5); The Procedures of PLAR (Questions 6-10); Outcomes (Questions 11, 12, 17, 18); and Attitudes (Questions 13 - 16, and 19). The Protocol and consent form are attached to the Report in Appendixes 1 and 2, respectively. A summary of interviewee responses to all questions is attached in Appendix 3 with demographic information attached as a table in Appendix 4.

PARTICIPANTS

The participants, identified by PLAR officers across Canada, were invited to take part in the study. While some were unavailable for interviews, only one refused. Most participants were enthusiastic about describing their experience with PLAR. Some made special efforts to take part in the interview.

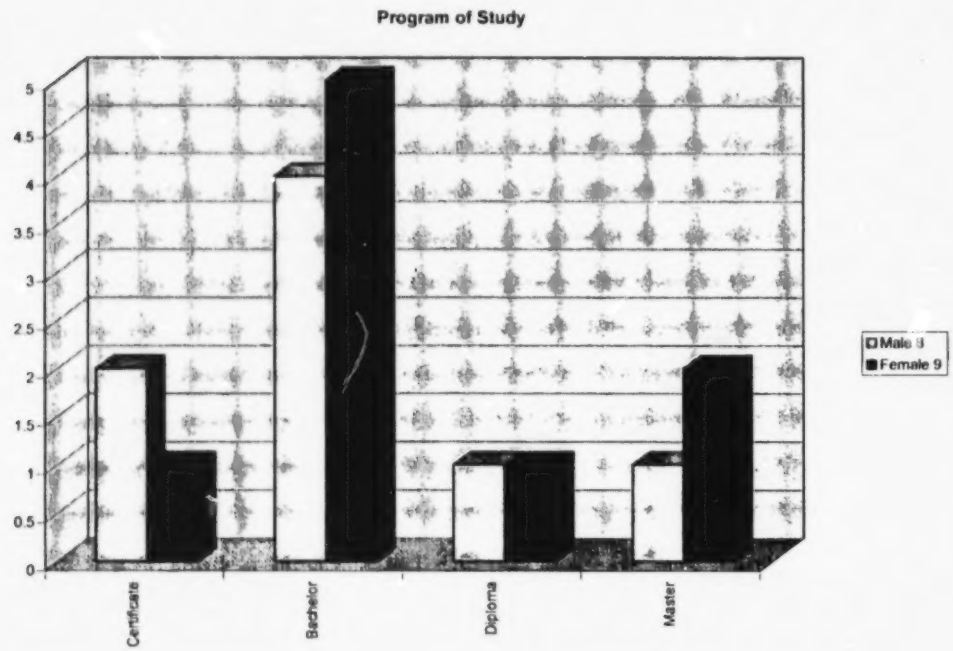
The respondents are, in general, older than those in the other two major studies, with a greater balance of genders than is reflected in those studies, or in general participation in PLAR, where women predominate. Because we are interested in experience with PLAR, rather than participation alone, we deliberately tried to balance the genders. As already mentioned, we selected university students primarily because

Chart 2:



college students dominated the other reported studies. The result was a mix of the two. Included also are individuals who have and have not finished the programs they have entered by means of the use of PLAR.

Chart 3:



RESPONSES - CONTACT AND INITIAL REACTIONS

Introduction to PLAR, for the respondents, spanned the spectrum from prior knowledge through organized programs to casual information from friends or relatives. The organized programs involved three respondents: being acquainted with the Armed Services Program; knowledge of opportunities for "fast tracking" from the United States; and contact with a work place program designed to foster development activities amongst all employees. In the latter case, classes were organized in the workplace for groups of employees. Eight respondents learned of the opportunity through contact with teaching agencies, either by means of a brochure or personal contact with staff or faculty. The remainder learned about PLAR from friends and relatives. The implication is that these respondents were already intending to engage in study before learning about PLAR. For many respondents even the term "Prior Learning Assessment" was unfamiliar, and only one respondent set out deliberately to search among institutions for such an opportunity. When they did encounter PLAR, the respondents explored it with enthusiasm and diligence.

All respondents reacted positively, though some with hesitation, to the opportunities involved. Some were amazed that credit might be given for informal learning, for most, learning at work. Some believed that it was long overdue, and some were just surprised. "Unusually progressive for a university", was one comment. For many PLAR was simply an opportunity to save time in the pursuit of a part-time credential whose demands, in terms of duration, stretched ahead interminably. The sense of a long overdue opportunity was mixed with some unease about the quality of the intended goal, and some questioned whether the alternative procedure was really possible. On the other hand, some respondents welcomed the alternative procedures, in this case the portfolio, as a new challenge of intrinsic interest. The portfolio was perceived as a more interesting task than the required courses.

Overall, the opportunity to save time, to accomplish a conventional goal in a shorter time than they had imagined, or a shorter time than the regular calendar had stipulated, was a more powerful incentive than saving money. However, for a number of respondents, sacrificing only one year's income, rather than the two or more the program required, was the most important factor.

For five of the respondents the opportunity to make use of PLAR was critical. They would not have undertaken the academic work if it had not been available. For ten respondents it was an added benefit, since most discovered PLAR only after they had embarked on the academic program. For one it was a requirement, since it involved entry to a graduate program without an undergraduate degree and for another it was interesting but not particularly necessary.

All respondents seized the advantages of PLAR with enthusiasm, but with some reservations with respect to what was to be demanded from them—was there a catch?—and with respect to the quality, private and public, of the eventual outcome.

THE PROCEDURES OF PLAR

The basic mechanisms of PLAR are uniform across Canada as they are elsewhere in the world: the challenge examination, the demonstration, the interview, and the

portfolio. However, for our respondents, the contact with those alternatives, the mixture, and, in the case of the portfolio, the form, varied enormously. In some cases the principal procedure is for the student, usually with advice, to challenge individual courses; in other cases it is a matter of challenging a program, almost always by means of a portfolio, in which the faculty designated the courses that had been successfully challenged. Twelve of the seventeen respondents used portfolios, four used a modified version of a portfolio, several used challenge examinations combined with demonstrations, resumes, and oral examinations.

The thirteen educational jurisdictions in Canada, combined with the short time in which PLAR has been introduced, and the way in which it has been introduced, contributed to the variety of the respondents' choice of mechanisms. Clearly, the presence of a friendly, knowledgeable, and imaginative intermediary made a critical difference. In most cases it was the PLAR co-ordinator from the relevant institution; in fewer cases it was administrative officers such as Deans, and in even fewer cases, it was faculty, on whom, eventually, the principal burden falls. In one case it was a knowledgeable friend who helped with the design of a portfolio based on cases instead of historic learning events.

Those respondents with easy access to the institution, or a PLAR Centre, in most cases received immediate and knowledgeable assistance with the alternative procedures. Mostly they had a sense that the facilitators were "running interference" for them among others in the institution who were uninformed or uninterested. The "distance" students, who made up about a third of the respondents, had the ordinary difficulties compounded. They made extensive use of the email and the telephone. The respondents experienced the most difficulty with others in the institution, such as those in the accounting office. On the other side of the equation, respondents indicated that they had been unable to benefit from employer financial support because the portfolio, and its preparation, didn't qualify for tuition support attached to conventional courses or programs. One respondent found that the costs of the portfolio did not qualify for the income tax relief for Education.

Most respondents said that there had been little negotiation over either procedures or results, though other replies suggested that there had been some choice with respect to the procedures that they followed. On unfamiliar administrative territory, the awareness of choice presumably lies in the eye of the beholder. On the other hand, once the portfolio or facsimile had been submitted there was little feedback of any kind. Because they had invested so much of their selves and their time in the production of a portfolio, this failure incurred both resentment and disappointment in all respondents. Those respondents who undertook challenge examinations, a procedure they were reasonably familiar with, at least received reasonably quick, and immediately comprehensible, responses.

A further difficulty for the respondents was the absence of easily available, and clearly stated, course objectives. The universities seem to have been much slower than colleges in translating their courses from stated intentions, the language of most university calendars, into defined objectives. In most cases the PLAR co-ordinator, or the students themselves, got the objectives from individual faculty members. In other cases, the student simply studied the textbook and guessed at the objectives.

For some respondents, particularly those associated with organized programs such as the Armed Services and the employer programs mentioned earlier, the time elapsing between first contact and response in terms of awards, was remarkably short. For most other respondents, particularly those who used the portfolio, the response was between three and six months. However, one respondent felt that the process took entirely too long, and another respondent has waited nearly two years from the submission of the portfolio without a response.

Clearly, these individuals, and PLAR users as reflected in the other Canadian studies, are pioneers. They are undertaking novel procedures in an environment that they have experienced since childhood. The procedures of courses, years, grades, and external evaluation are imbedded in their memories. They are undertaking these procedures in an atmosphere where the procedures are simultaneously as novel to the institutions as they are to the students. It would be difficult to overemphasize the significance of the availability of intermediaries, for example PLAR coordinators, in the successful use of PLAR.

The variety in the mixture of processes the respondents experienced are to be expected and attest to the resiliency and imagination of both the students and the institutions. Given the bureaucratization tendencies of all large institutions, one can expect that over time the variations will decline. On the other hand, it may be that PLAR itself releases a new quality into the academic process, an individual independence from the teaching agency. That is surely one of the purest goals of all education. It may be the case that a substantial degree of individual independence is desirable and will remain inseparable from the process of PLAR, where ever it is found.

OUTCOMES

ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENTS

Respondents distinguished between their reactions to different parts of the PLAR process. Nine of the seventeen participants were pleased, even delighted, by the credits they were awarded which ranged in number from thirty-four to one. Essentially, they were responding to the fact that the learning they knew they had accomplished from their lives and work was "formally" acknowledged. Those who were less satisfied were critical of the length of time involved, the amount of credit obtained, and the attitude on the part of the institution to them and to PLAR. "Shoddy", was the term used by one respondent to the treatment. Even the respondent, who, after two years, was still waiting for a result, and who observed that "we felt like naughty six year olds who have been sent to our rooms", indicated satisfaction from having completed a portfolio. Those still in mid-stream of completing their programs, and who didn't yet know how many credits would be awarded, expressed satisfaction with most of the process.

For some respondents, their renewed contact with academic work was, in one respondent's words, "a no brainer". They found the work relatively easy, and in some cases boring. However, that was not the case with respect to the creation of a portfolio which they found demanding, time consuming, and, eventually, highly rewarding. "If you are having a bad day, you can cheer yourself up immeasurably by rereading your

portfolio", observed one respondent. While another respondent used the term "free credits", there was little, if any, sense of getting a "discounted" degree or academic credit. Many found that the main problem in equating learning from their experience with academic content, particularly in the case of challenge examinations, was unfamiliarity with the academic language. It was a problem that many reported "nervousness" about, but believed they had coped with satisfactorily. They also reported considerable satisfaction in being able to make the learning associated with their employment more relevant to their formal studies.

All respondents realized that they were missing something they had learned to associate with formal education - the discipline of classes, the collegiality of other students and instructors, essentially the familiar culture of being educated. But they remained committed to the PLAR process and sure of the quality of the process, even in the face of scepticism on the part of other people. For some of the "distance" students freedom from actual courses and fixed schedules was an advantage. They encountered having to organize the experience themselves, in an environment that had in the past been organized by the teaching institution. One respondent said that she had pleaded with an authority to provide a timetable since she worried about her tendency to procrastinate.

The main complaint from all respondents was the lack or minimum of feed-back to their work, especially in response to their portfolios. Even when succeeding in obtaining credits, as most did, they wished to know the basis of the judgements. While some respondents were disappointed in the grades assigned—one respondent felt that he was judged much more severely than an "ordinary student"—the absence of feed-back overall was the most persistent disappointment. One can speculate that the lack of feed-back may be due to the lack of experience by faculty in "objectifying" their response to a portfolio, a difficulty that hopefully will be soon overcome.

TIME AND MONEY

The original justification for PLAR was the time saved, both for teaching agencies and thus for the students, in not having to teach what the students have already learned under non-formal circumstances. That means separating evaluation, the act of making private learning public, from instruction, the conscious conveying of public knowledge. The corollary of that process is reputedly saving the agencies, and thus the society as whole, and the student, the cost of the redundant instruction.

Almost all the respondents reported that their time had been saved. For them, even the few for whom that had not been the case, the time saved was more important than the money saved. Essentially, the amount of time saved equalled the difference between their use of PLAR and the stated demands of the academic calendar. Given the average age and circumstances of the respondents, they had envisaged years of part-time study before achieving their objective. The fact that they learned that they could negotiate that time, by means of PLAR, was a major contribution to their satisfaction with the process. For some respondents, the time saved meant one or more fewer years of leave from employment to pursue required full-time study, resulting in less cost to them and less disruption in their lives overall.

The *A Slice of the Iceberg* (1999) has been the one of the few studies to address the thorny problem of assessing the costs of PLAR to both the agencies providing it and

to the students making use of it. It is clearly apparent that while the procedures of PLAR may be relatively common across Canada and the world, the costs, and the ways of ascertaining those costs, are not. *A Slice of the Iceberg* found provincial and agency differences in defining and assessing costs and in the allocation of charges. In general, the argument that PLAR saves money by eliminating redundancy is hard to support among Canadian colleges given the present financial systems and practices. With respect to users of PLAR, the "*Iceberg*" study reports: "Initial analysis indicates that PLAR learners obtain cost savings from PLAR. However, not all cost considerations were taken into account, such as lost wages, daycare and transportation" (Cross Canada Partnership on PLAR, p. 60). What seems to be missing from these considerations is the potential of increased demand by potential students if the use of PLAR is increased. Some of our respondents reported that the existence of PLAR made the critical difference in undertaking their studies. Other respondents indicted they would have hesitated, if not abandoned, their plans had they had to repeat courses whose material they already knew.

This study took no account of agency costs, but in the case of our respondents, the findings of the "*Iceberg*" study are fully confirmed. Considerable savings were reported. These savings were calculated on the basis of actual expenditures, to date, by the students who are not yet finished, as compared to the stated costs in the institutions' calendars for pursuing the academic program, part or full-time in the conventional manner. In some cases respondents took part in experimental programs in which all costs to students were covered. In one case, the employer, as part of its program, met all the immediate instructional costs. In another case, the comparative costs of the credits awarded and the full cost of taking them amounted to hundreds of dollars.

In most cases the respondents did not know at the outset, nor did respondents whose programs were not yet completed know at the time of their interview, what the total costs would amount to. What surprised us was the relative indifference to potential money saved, compared to their interest in time saved, by the use of PLAR. Some respondents, even after completing their programs, simply didn't remember what the costs had been. It is as though the costs of Education are simply the "cost of doing business", which amounts to living in contemporary society, and few of us expect to be able to negotiate them. These respondents were learning how to negotiate time, and the fact that that negotiation became commensurate with cost was a source of unanticipated satisfaction, but cost was not a primary consideration for these respondents. That may not be the case for lower income or unemployed potential students.

PORTFOLIOS

According to most of the existing research, and to the folk-lore of PLAR, the Portfolio has taken on an independent existence. Frequently it becomes independent of the immediate objective of PLAR, the winning of academic credits, and independent of the PLAR process itself, as is evidenced from the promotion of portfolios in public schools. Two thirds of our respondents made use of portfolios and reported that they intend to continue using them throughout their lives. Characteristically, based on evidence from most other anecdotal reports of PLAR, our respondents were unfamiliar with portfolios before encountering PLAR. They reacted to the prospect of making one with alarm and hesitation. Once finished, however, they regarded their portfolios as

achievements of personal satisfaction beyond whatever immediate use to which they were put. They found the preparation of portfolios both difficult and time-consuming, as well as immensely rewarding. The assiduous personal record keepers approached the task with more confidence than the present and future-minded respondents who had been careless over record keeping. Some of the latter were able to persuade the officials that a case-form, in which the learning outcomes relevant to course or program were presented, was as legitimate as the more traditional form.

Above all, the respondents found satisfaction, sometimes surprise, in what they had learned outside of Formal Education. We have to assume that the satisfaction was prompted by the assurance that the formal system was willing, under the new rules, to take that learning seriously. Some respondents felt that the creation of a portfolio, for them, at their age, was instrumental to achieving a more comprehensive understanding of their own lives. "Put life in perspective, boosted self-confidence" and " realized lack of balance in my life", were some of the reflective comments about the results of developing a portfolio. Creating portfolios seemed to be the major component for the changes in attitude the respondents reported in a following section.

ATTITUDES

Essentially, all respondents expressed pride in their academic accomplishments and in mastering a new means to that accomplishment. They found satisfaction in the reinforced understanding that learning, important learning, occurs outside of Formal Education. Particularly, learning occurs in their employment. They reported increased confidence in themselves as learners, because they knew what they had learned at work could be transferred to the conventional arena of learning, Formal Education.

What also emerged for the respondents was a certain maturity, a certain de-mystification of Formal Education itself. Many of them exhibited a new degree of detachment from Formal Education: they had been able to negotiate with its officials with respect to what they had learned, who they were in effect, and what they wanted.

Finally, those respondents who had developed portfolios had learned to see their lives, past and future, in terms of learning. They believed that this was both an understanding and a skill that had become, to them, valuable in itself.

ATTITUDES OF OTHERS

When the respondents were asked to discuss the attitudes of other people—friends, spouses, associates etc.—the comments spanned the spectrum from mistrust to enthusiasm. In general, as reported in other studies, the respondents found in other people an ignorance of PLAR. When PLAR was explained, most people displayed interest, enthusiasm, and in particular, support for the respondents' use of PLAR, as well as general support for their undertaking academic work while being employed. Many people wanted information about PLAR for their own use. In contrast, some respondents experienced scepticism and distrust from other people. These people displayed the belief that the achievement was, after all, only an "equivalent", less than the real thing. The underlying attitude, particularly among those people who had achieved academic degrees

etc., was that unless the respondents followed the traditional path of attending classes etc., the outcome was not quite legitimate.

When it came to advising others who were planning to make use of PLAR themselves, our respondents were, almost without exception, enthusiastic and supportive, even in several cases offering to be advisors. The advice offered was to get help initially from the PLAR Coordinator, make a plan ahead of time: "Assess whether you are a good candidate, if you haven't been learning....you can't make them up". Generally, the advice referred to creating a portfolio: "keep your records and documentation"; "have faith … it is always darkest just before the dawn"; "force yourself to think outside of formal educational experiences"; "they will want to throw in the towel...tell them 'Don't Dare' … they will find they can place a different value on themselves". All of this enthusiasm, perhaps the enthusiasm of the newly converted, was mixed with admonition that achievement with the use of PLAR was not without a lot of hard work.

IMPROVEMENTS IN PLAR

As one would expect, the immediate response from all respondents was that PLAR needs to be better publicized and more widely available. However, the comment that "PLAR ought not to be offered unless the institution is ready", reflects frequent experience with faculty, support staff (particularly in the accounting office), and others, who knew nothing about the introduction of PLAR to their institution, and were not responding to the special circumstances of exemptions, timing, concurrent participation in two teaching agencies (such as a College and a University); and the special requirements of assessing portfolios. Most of all the respondents wanted *course objectives more easily available; better and more comprehensive feed-back, especially of their portfolios; and clearer policies with respect to practices and standards.* At the same time the stated need for "wider recognition" included concerns extending beyond the Formal Education system to employers and governments who denied financial support for costs associated with PLAR such as portfolios and exemptions.

CONCLUSIONS

The seventeen individuals in this study re-entered Formal Education by novel means, a means based on an individual assessment of what they knew, had learned, outside the system of Formal Education, rather than solely on what they had learned within it. In a sense, their new contact with the system was on the basis of what they knew, rather than what they did not know. That combined with the opportunity, in however limited degree, to negotiate with the system, made the re-entry special for them. Presumably, it was also a special experience for the educational officials involved for whom the provision of PLAR, as an obligation on Formal Education, is equally novel.

In all the changes in Formal Education since the mid-point of the last century, perhaps nothing has changed so radically as what it means to be a *student*. The opportunity to negotiate times, programs, location, as in distance education, and consistency of participation, have lead to the current concept of the *Learning College* (Krakauer, 2001; O'Banion, 1997), of which PLAR is an essential part. Since the late nineteen fifties the role of student has been changing relentlessly, with more and more

freedom to choose where and how, with what temporal rhythm, and with what learning style, one will cope with Formal Education. The *Learning College* is the contemporary result of these series of changes, designed to be a truly "student-centred" teaching institution. The ultimate stage of this evolution is the ability to negotiate not only the process of Formal Education but also the transformation of private to public learning, that is to negotiate the transformation of learner to student.

Most of our respondents encountered PLAR by accident. Few set out initially to make use of its opportunities. For some respondents, PLAR became, instantly, the primary basis on which they continued in their educational quest; for some it was a welcome add-on that eased and ultimately, enriched, their educational experience; for others PLAR was a minor addition. We, of course, still know little of those who, having encountered PLAR, declined the opportunity. There is plenty of folk-lore of individuals who abandoned the prospect of the various devices and pursued their objectives in the conventional way. There is also evidence, as in the case of four of our respondents, that their encounter with PLAR was principally by means of programs: the military and an employer. Their role as employees, or members of the Armed Services, was the means by which they became students, and to a degree, why they remained students.

All of our respondents persevered despite doubts, frustrations, and impediments. It would appear that future publicization of PLAR needs to be increased, both for information about the procedures and legitimacy purposes. The most promising populations to reach are those for whom PLAR is a necessity, as in the case of five of our respondents.

Our respondents were older students in a hurry. They perceived time as their most formidable obstacle. Perhaps because they were older, and almost all employed, time was a more critical issue for them than cost. While they welcomed the savings, that almost all of them experienced, that was not the main consideration for them. However, some respondents displayed unease that deviating from the stately rhythm of successive courses decreed by teaching agencies, might somehow devaluate their degrees or certificates. None of our respondents wanted either the appearance or the reality of "cheap" degrees. The respondent who used the term "free credits" did so with humour, and acknowledged, as did all the others, that what they had learned outside the formal system represented hard work, and should be acknowledged. One respondent stated that PLAR should never apply to more than one third of a program.

Our respondents used all of the available PLAR devices, though a larger proportion used portfolios (66%) than in the "*Iceberg*" report (12%). Many were extremely nervous about that challenge, but all, upon its completion, found the portfolio satisfying. The frequent comment, from the respondents in our study and others, "I was surprised by how much I knew!", by itself, begs further research. On the other hand, no one attending to such would be surprised that the portfolio represents a great deal of work and effort. For most respondents creating the portfolio was a novel experience. Perhaps the increasing use of portfolios in Secondary and even Elementary schools (McLaughlin & Vogt, 1996) will, in future generations, eliminate the novelty. Keeping diaries, which resembles the personal portfolio, is one of the oldest human enterprises. Perhaps this enterprise is only temporarily obscured by the onslaught of new media.

What was noticeable in our study was the emergence, among our respondents, of the "self-directed student", in addition to "self-directed learners", which all of them were.

The need to organize their own time, to make contact with a variety of staff at the teaching agencies, to seek out, and sometimes guess at the learning objectives of challenged courses, and to design the form of a portfolio, suggested independent initiative with respect to the *form* of Education, as well as to its content. The detachment and de-mystification reported earlier in this study leads us to a tentative conclusion that the experience of PLAR has the potential for producing genuinely "free" graduates, who are capable, not only of learning, but of gaining greater self-consciousness and control of their own learning.

John Ohliger (1974) asked, nearly 30 years ago, if "Life Long Education is a Guarantee of Permanent Inadequacy"? One interpretation of his question, which has not been much debated in the intervening years, reflects the tendency of the huge enterprise of Formal Education to treat students more like *subjects* than like *citizens*. We are encouraged by our "suggestive" findings that the PLAR students in this study show indications of being citizens, as distinct from subjects, with respect to their attitudes to their Formal Education. That is, for them, the gap between learner and student has been bridged, if not closed.

We did not find much evidence of Michelson's (1996) "situated learning" or clashes of culture, though we had one Status Indian among the correspondents. Perhaps our methods of selection eliminated that possibility. However, what seems clear is that Formal Education is its own culture, and entering it, and re-entering it, seems as much a cultural change as a merely functional and instrumental undertaking. What PLAR seems to do, and we need more evidence, is to stimulate and articulate the discourse between Learning and Education in substantive terms of student placement and progress to the benefit of all.

The recent report, *Business Leaders' And Employers' Views About Credit for Workplace Learning* (2001), a report of discussions among employers about the use of PLAR, suggests a similar cultural distance exists between Business and Education. What is important, presumably, is not to *close* the gap between them, but to *bridge* it. That is, to maintain a dialogue between them involving all the participants, especially students.

Our exploration of the experience with PLAR of these seventeen people suggests to us that PLAR is a powerful instrument altering the present balance between *learning* and *education*; between student and teaching institution; between learner and student; between private and public learning. Given the present state of apparent hesitancy, amounting to indifference, with the utilization of PLAR, its potential for radically improving Formal Education, beyond saving money or time, seems to us to be a powerful reason for new enthusiasm and commitment. The recent National Forum of PLAR in Halifax, with its commitment to action, may be the necessary stimulant to achieving that goal.

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Appendix 1:

Protocol

Questions for Interviews with Users of PLA

NALL Project 4: Group 2

The following items have been compiled for inclusion in an interview package. The intention of the interviewer should be to have an open-ended discussion that encourages full responses from each participant. The Probes are designed to assist the interviewer and should be used only if necessary to facilitate discussion.

Demographics (applicable at the time of their PLA)

1. Project sub-group: Which sub-group was the user a member of at the time of their assessment? If more than one sub-group applies, select the ones in which PLA took place.

   University student ___
   Secondary school student ___
   Apprentice ___

2. Gender M ___
   F ___

3. Age Category:

   18years + under ___
   19 – 24 ___
   25 – 29 ___
   30 – 34 ___
   35 – 39 ___
   40 – 44 ___
   45 – 49 ___
   50 – 54 ___
   55 – 59 ___
   60 + ___
   Not available ___

4. Student Status:

   Part-time ___
   Full-time ___
   Apprentice ___
   Not available ___

5. Employment Status:

   Employed full-time ___

Employed part-time ___
Unemployed ___
Not available ___

6. Program of Study _____

Questions

1. Tell me about how you first learned of PLA?

Probes: Did someone who went through it, tell you about it?
Did you see written information or attend an orientation?

2. What was your initial reaction when you first heard about it?

Probes: Did it sound like a good or bad idea?
Did you wonder about how it could apply to your situation?

3. What went into your decision to undertake PLA?

Probes: What circumstances led you to it – work-related, personal, professional, educational, economic?
What factors did you consider?

4. What role did PLA play in your decision to undertake further training/education?

Probes: How important was it?
Was it critical to your decision or an added benefit to a decision you would have made in any case?

5. What were you trying to obtain through PLA?

Probes: Course credits, exemption from courses or an amount of training (apprenticeship), non-credit courses, qualification to apply for job or a raise, personal satisfaction, other types of recognition?

6. Tell me about the specific steps you took in your PLA application and assessment process?

Probes: Was there any orientation (session or information package)?
What staff members or other officials did you speak to during the whole process?
Where were your assessments held?
What kinds of human or material supports were provided?
How long did an assessment process take from application to result?

7. Could you explain how you were involved in determining how your PLA would be conducted, if at all.

Probes: Did you discuss with the assessors how you thought you could best demonstrate the learning expectations?
Were there any choices of assessment methods provided to you?
How were the assessment methods determined?

8. What specific methods of assessment were used in your assessments?

Probes: Challenge exam, physical demonstration, standardized test, portfolio assessment, others?

9. What were the direct results of your assessments and how do you feel about them?

Probes: Credits, exemption from courses or an amount of training (apprenticeship), job eligibility, raise, other types of recognition?
Are you satisfied with the results? If not, why not?

10. What kinds of problems did you encounter, if any during your PLA experience?

Probes: Clarity of information, attitudes of others, scheduling of assessments, feedback from assessors?

11. Did you benefit from PLA? If yes, in what ways? If no, why not?

Probes: How did it impact on your progress through your training/educational program?
Did it cost or save you money?
Did it affect your employment situation? If yes, how?
Did it affect your occupational certification? If yes, how?

12. Have your feelings about all of your learning changed since going through PLA?

Probes: Do you feel differently about your formal classroom learning? If yes, in what way?
Do you feel differently about your non-classroom learning? If yes, in what way?

13. What needs to be changed or added to improve PLA services?

Probes: What would you like to see added to PLA services?
What would you like to see removed from PLA services?

14. If you were asked to meet with PLA learners coming in for the first time, what advice would you give them?

Probes: Should they do it?
What should they do first?
Who should they meet with?

15. How do you think others feel about PLA?

Probes: What experiences have you had, if any with friends, fellow-students, work colleagues, employer, professional association, union?

16. Has PLA affected your personal life? If yes, how?

Probes: Has it changed your view of yourself?
Did it affect your motivation to learn?
Did it affect your self-esteem?
Did it give you more time to spend on personal issues or less time?
Was your family affected in any way?

17. What kinds of costs were involved in your assessment?

Probes: Assessment fees?
Administrative or counselling fees?
Indirect costs such as daycare?

18. How did these costs affect you?

Probes: Was any other assistance you were receiving reduced?
Did you save money?
Did you lose earnings?
Did you receive any educational or workplace financial support?

19. If you had an opportunity to undertake PLA again, would you do it? Could you explain why?

20. Is there anything else you would like to add about your PLA experience?

NALL - the research network for
NEW APPROACHES TO LIFELONG LEARNING
Ontario Institute for Studies in Education /University of Toronto

Appendix 2: Consent Form

April 24, 2001

Dear Participant,

We are asking you to take part in a research study inquiring into the experience you had as a user of Prior Learning Assessment and Recognition (PLAR) during your academic career. The study is part of a larger research project entitled "New Approaches to Lifelong Learning" sponsored by the Social Science and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC), and centered at The Ontario Institute for Studies in Education/University of Toronto, and under the direction of Professor David Livingstone. In the case of this sub-study the investigators are Monica Collins (University of Windsor), Alan Thomas (OISE/UT) and Lynette Plett (OISE/UT).

With the slow but steady growth of the use of PLAR in Canada, we are interested in the experience of those students who make use of it in as broad terms as possible. We will ask you such things as how you found out about it, what response(s) you got from the institut- ion offering it, how you felt about making use of it, your perception of attitudes on the part of other students and faculty, and any other aspects that you wish to talk about.

If you agree to take part in the study the following circumstances will apply:

- the interview will take up to two and a half hours;
- you will not be identified in any of the reporting of the results;
- you are free to withdraw from the study at any time;
- after the results have been analyzed and reported the data will be destroyed.

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PHONE: (416) 923-6641 EXT. 2392 • FAX: (416) 926-4751
http://nall.oise.utoronto.ca

If you have any further questions now or at any time during the study, please call or write: Alan Thomas (416-923-6641 ext. 2350; athomas@oise.utoronto.ca), or Monica Collins (519-253-3000 ext. 3455; mcollin@uwindsor.ca).

Please sign the consent form at the bottom and return it to your interviewer. Thank you for your help.

Dr. Alan Thomas
Monica Collins

CONSENT FORM

I agree to participate in the enquiry into the EXPERIENCES OF STUDENT USERS OF PLAR under the conditions specified in the letter provided including guaranteed anonymity and the right to withdraw at any time.

SIGNATURE: _____

INTERVIEWEE NUMBER: _____

DATE and PLACE: _____

If you would like to receive a copy of the final report please write your mailing address on the back of this form.

Summary of Responses

Appendix 3:

Question 1:	**Tell me about how you first learned of PLA?**
Subject 1	brochure – "transfer credits"; PLA officer; didn't recognize lingo
Subject 2	co-worker – Learning Centre supervisor at workplace
Subject 3	colleagues were fast tracking in US; subject inquired about PLA options at institution
Subject 4	investigated after seeing information in program brochure
Subject 5	written communication from university (newsletter/calendar?)
Subject 6	community college and subject's workplace initiative; college PLA advisor made presentation at workplace
Subject 7	new initiative at college where subject employed; called experiential learning
Subject 8	from friend of spouse who was married to someone involved with PLAR
Subject 9	course flyer; attended orientation on PLAR process and portfolio development course
Subject 10	introduced to PLAR by co-worker – Learning Centre supervisor at work-place
Subject 11	knew about accreditation for military courses at another institution; Dean of program told subject about PLA
Subject 12	from friend attending university; subject contacted university
Subject 13	from Dean of Admissions and Dean of subject's program at institution; received printed material about portfolio development
Subject 14	portfolio replaced required undergrad degree for admission to Masters program
Subject 15	From PLA participant who had heard from a professor
Subject 16	spouse; inquired at program
Subject 17	at workplace; subject counseled clients concerning education; there was written information about PLA at office
Question 2:	**What was your initial reaction when you first heard about it?**
Subject 1	Wonderful opportunity; influenced decision to proceed; more reasonable time to complete program
Subject 2	Relevant; made sense-had done equivalent courses
Subject 3	Relief; "light at end of tunnel"; hope to complete degree

Subject 4	Very pleased; courses would duplicate prior learning/experience; this would allow completion of program more quickly
Subject 5	This was for her; should be given credit for non-academic course work and experience
Subject 6	Amazed that people would be given credit for knowledge; this is done informally in industry
Subject 7	"this makes sense"-why re-do what subject was already doing
Subject 8	Very good idea; unusually progressive for a university
Subject 9	Subject thought own knowledge and skills as good as or better than that of the students that the subject supervised; a perfect opportunity
Subject 10	An opportunity; program too long
Subject 11	Pleased; credit for work already completed
Subject 12	Enthusiastic; education from work should be recognized
Subject 13	"I couldn't do it"; could. provide materials/documentation; great to get credit for life experience
Subject 14	Intimidated; a test…had to prove myself; questioned self-worth
Subject 15	Terrific; excellent opportunity; long overdue for industry knowledge to be acknowledged
Subject 16	Understood what was being looked for but didn't understand amount of work that would be involved
Subject 17	A great time saver; very appropriate; immediately thought of own situation; hesitant about applying PLA in university because experience at trades level; didn't have background to go into university
Question 3:	**What went into your decision to undertake PLA?**
Subject 1	Pain of PLA less than redoing the entire program
Subject 2	Compared course outline with experience felt she could be exempt and "feel comfortable"
Subject 3	Frustrated after withdrawing from classes due to travel for work-length of time to finish program; needed degree for career advancement
Subject 4	Interested in concept; preferred spending time and effort on PLA to doing courses it replaced
Subject 5	Daunting process requiring much research/documentation; but able to gain 34/50 credits left in subject's program; too good an offer to turn down; stood good chance of being assessed the credits
Subject 6	Wouldn't pursue a program without using PLA; subject believes in concept and wants to walk the talk

Subject 7	Saves time and money; but time most important; likes self-paced, working at home; carefully examines course before pursing a PLA for it
Subject 8	PLA gave opportunity to acquire credits towards and degree and combine credits gained in various programs
Subject 9	Convinced own knowledge and experience matched that of co-op students; PLA an opportunity for recognition
Subject 10	Had extensive personal records; 5 years too long (to finish?); "I knew all that stuff and would not have taken the course" (challenged a course; got credit with a portfolio)
Subject 11	Saved time and effort; reduced redundancy and time to obtain degree
Subject 12	Personal; wanted to see what would be applicable from background
Subject 13	Program Dean persuasive; ongoing support & encouragement; didn't think she had the necessary documentation; thought it would take too long to recreate it.
Subject 14	Education & work were related; either do PLA portfolio or complete undergrad degree-no decision needed
Subject 15	Selfish-get degree and recognition for years in industry
Subject 16	No option-might get into Masters program without completed required undergrad degree
Subject 17	PLA the only option for me; spent 10 years in school and didn't have motivation and interest to take that all over again; wouldn't have finished the undergrad and didn't want to wait 10 years to complete degree
Question 4:	**What role did PLA play in your decision to undertake further training/education?**
Subject 1	Would have looked into other options
Subject 2	Would likely have taken course anyway; this was a gift; helped finish program
Subject 3	Fast tracking important to subject; disappointed with differences between subject's institution and the US
Subject 4	Not initially; later appreciated aid of PLA
Subject 5	Might not have been so inspired w/o PLA; 3 credits at a time, 58 in total to finish program-slow
Subject 6	Wouldn't have taken program if PLA not available
Subject 7	Wouldn't consider programs if couldn't use PLA
Subject 8	With PLAR, pursuing a degree at subject's age no longer irrelevant
Subject 9	Opportunity subject had been waiting for
Subject 10	Wouldn't have taken initial course if not for PLA

Subject 11	Added benefit; already pursing the degree
Subject 12	Already enrolled; PLA provided incentive to pursue Arts degree
Subject 13	Already in program; applied for PLA credits after
Subject 14	PLA not important in pursuing program but helped being admitted; helped subject decide/reconfirm what to do
Subject 15	Initial decision not affected
Subject 16	Had to do PLA for subject's program
Subject 17	Perquisite waiver, not a course waiver; PLA was critical; if not for PLA subject wouldn't have taken program
Question 5:	**What were you trying to obtain through PLA?**
Subject 1	Course credits; job change
Subject 2	Exemptions
Subject 3	Course credits to complete degree; recognition at workplace; promotion without validating decisions and knowledge
Subject 4	Course exemptions/advanced credit for certificate (for work)
Subject 5	Course credit
Subject 6	Course credit; credit hours
Subject 7	Course credit
Subject 8	Challenged ten courses; succeeded with nine
Subject 9	Seven exemptions; needed credentials for job security
Subject 10	Course credit; exemptions (credits); workplace focused on education
Subject 11	12 credit hours
Subject 12	Course credits
Subject 13	Course exemptions
Subject 14	Entry into a program
Subject 15	Get credits for work exp in a degree program
Subject 16	Get into a program
Subject 17	Admission to grad school w/o completing undergrad; recognition for ten years of work in colleges and Department of National Defense training programs
Question 6:	**Tell me about the specific steps you took in your PLA application and assessment process?**
Subject 1	Telephone and email communication with Coordinator; gave general background; no orientation or written material

Subject 2	Personal interview which led to exemption from 3 courses; details handled by coordinator of Learning supervisor at work
Subject 3	No orientation or written material; had to select from a list of courses that matched subject's competencies often based only on calendar description, met with one prof which was a disaster; had contact with PLAR coordinator; requested detailed course outline from coordinator; developed portfolio for course-took 30 days to do
Subject 4	Subject made inquiry; attended 2 half day workshops; applied for credits with portfolio--took 3 months to do
Subject 5	Sent in a fee; received book and computer disks with templates for portfolio; drew a life line of accomplishments; collected supporting documents; identified courses which subject felt she had; received help by phone-took 6-8 wks to do
Subject 6	Met with program coordinator; wrote a 4 page paper on how his previous course work met program objectives; had to come up with learning outcomes for both his exp and for courses he wanted to PLA; had guidelines for the paper
Subject 7	Challenged for each course; went through curriculum and identified what she already knew; how she could prove it; used portfolios, interviews, demonstrations, observations, challenge tests; there were no learning outcomes-used descriptions for catalogue; submitted a portfolio
Subject 8	Saw a PLAR councillor who advised which courses to challenge, arranged appointments, interviews; got printed materials; didn't attend orientation for portfolio course; wrote "proposals" indicating his knowledge for each course; had discussions with prof; had interview with prof after presented proposal; waited for result
Subject 9	Attended orientation and portfolio development course; PLA facilitator guided process; used portfolio and challenge exam plus informal discussion, oral exam, formal meetings to review portfolio
Subject 10	Learning Centre coordinator at workplace evaluated employees and liaised with academic institution; attended portfolio course and was counselled about how to challenge what courses; subject submitted portfolio for first course; it was sent to academic institution for evaluation
Subject 11	Documentation
Subject 12	Called academic institution; set up appointment with coordinator; filled out application; submitted resume, transcripts and a cover letter outlining motivation
Subject 13	Got a document with requirements; wrote original work for portfolio; Friend/colleague helped subject; had people validate her work and used them as references; used telephone and email a little to communicate with institution and a book about portfolio writing-took 3 months to do

Subject 14	Applied; took portfolio course; completed and submitted portfolio; it was assessed and accepted w/o interview; read by 3 profs and the Dean (3 wks from submission to acceptance)
Subject 15	Took portfolio course; presented portfolio; was asked a few (in-appropriate) questions by profs; had to re-do parts of portfolio and resubmit it
Subject 16	Worked with PLA Centre to do portfolio; portfolio was presented to institution and accepted without any question, interview, feedback (November to January to do portfolio; March before subject got notice of acceptance-took prodding
Subject 17	Subject fit entrance profile (military) was like transfer credit; subject was assessed based on essay which was part of application package; never heard back
Question 7:	**Could you explain how you were involved in determining how PLA would be conducted, if at all?**
Subject 1	Some negotiation, but sent material and got results
Subject 2	Felt she negotiated PLA credits-"free credits"
Subject 3	No choice in methodology or voicing of preferences; "textbook based competency"
Subject 4	Requirements laid out; choice in learning experiences chosen to apply; did preliminary portfolio, got feedback & suggestions then completed final version
Subject 5	Thinks portfolio send to four assessors but no further involvement
Subject 6	Procedures already in place-four page paper at one institution, brochure with course descriptions, learning outcomes mock challenge exam at another
Subject 7	Not involved-not in communication with assessors
Subject 8	Present proposal, in person interview (1 to 2 hour) waited for results
Subject 9	No input into process
Subject 10	No chance to negotiate-portfolio sent to institution to be reviewed; waited (6 months); no change to talk about it, institution sent subject a note
Subject 11	Provided documentation
Subject 12	Coordinator showed documentation to faculty-dean allocated course credit
Subject 13	Submitted portfolio in November; received response in February; received 27/30 credits w/o explanation; called institution for specific feedback
Subject 14	No choice
Subject 15	No involvement

Subject 16	No choice; no option for standing in program only acceptance to program
Subject 17	Not involved at all; no leeway. It was very structured
Question 8:	**What specific methods of assessment were used in your assessment?**
Subject 1	Challenge exams; papers; employment
Subject 2	Interview; resume
Subject 3	Portfolio-no specific feedback
Subject 4	PLA workshops; portfolio
Subject 5	Portfolio
Subject 6	Paper (at university); challenge exam; demonstration (at college)
Subject 7	Portfolio (at university); demonstration, observation, challenge tests, interviews (at college)
Subject 8	"proposal" indicating knowledge for specific course. Consulted course outlines and textbooks. Interview with instructor
Subject 9	Portfolio + informal discussion; + informal oral exam; + formal meeting
Subject 10	Portfolio
Subject 11	Review of documentation
Subject 12	Portfolio and resume/transcripts
Subject 13	Portfolio
Subject 14	Portfolio
Subject 15	Portfolio and credit transfer
Subject 16	Portfolio
Subject 17	Profile essay at university; portfolio in college courses
Question 9:	**What were the direct results of your assessments and how do you feel about them?**
Subject 1	Credits; no dissatisfaction with assessments
Subject 2	Exemptions; felt she negotiated assessment; never uneasy with the process
Subject 3	Credits for 2 courses; took 6-8 wks to receive feedback; grateful and relieved but rewards minimal for work, care, time that went into developing portfolios. Relief-had copies of case studies, work samples and other documentation (portfolio assessment-no feedback)
Subject 4	Maximum credit hours for program; pleased with assessment and whole process
Subject 5	34 credits; very happy; assessment identified additional courses she had not targeted; encouraged her to finish
Subject 6	Credit hours/course credit; pass/fail very disappointing

Subject 7	Single course credit; not indication of any gaps in learning; no feedback
Subject 8	9 out of 10 courses; self-imposed difficulty; missed collegiality at times but also is impatient with undergrads' preoccupations; very satisfied with results
Subject 9	7 exemptions; process took "far too long"; excellent feedback; marks lower than should have been; felt he'd been marked more harshly than traditional student
Subject 10	20 or 22 exemptions; no specific feedback; note saying a 'B' had been assigned; enjoyed process
Subject 11	12 credit hours; quick and easy progress; met his expectations-very satisfied; will graduate earlier by several years
Subject 12	24 credit hours; pleased and surprised; process was swift
Subject 13	27 of 30 credits; identified courses she had successfully challenged but didn't say shy she wasn't assessed the full number; she called to find out. Was exempted from courses but had to replace those with others.
Subject 14	Acceptance into program; has an excellent document; greater self esteem
Subject 15	Still waiting for results; disappointed-institution lacks vision; didn't acknowledge PLA candidates: "felt like naughty six year olds who have been sent to our rooms"; no follow through; difficult to maintain respect
Subject 16	Acceptance into program; would have liked to sit down with the Chair to find out what was look for
Subject 17	Accepted into program; felt it validated own experience and exceeded own expectations. Couldn't believe own prior learning was worth an undergrad degree
Question 10:	**What kinds of problems did you encounter, if any, during your PLA experience?**
Subject 1	None at college; attitude at university; problems with accounting. PLA not problem-"bored out of her mind by the undergraduate courses"
Subject 2	Logistical-coordination of participants in her groups
Subject 3	Incomplete or no course descriptions; long delays; faculty resistance; personal fears about compromising value of degree
Subject 4	Getting documentation or evidence from past years
Subject 5	Finding documentation; creative substitutions; remembering; thinking broadly about experience – how it fits (applies); people at institution very supportive
Subject 6	No learning outcomes PLA not done with learners n mind; administration of PLA shoddy; portfolios used even when demonstrations more appropriate

Subject 7	Unclear, unstated outcomes; lack of clear direction for assessment; guessing; student in leadership role
Subject 8	No real difficulty-self imposed
Subject 9	Process too long; didn't know costs in advance; unable to qualify for employer reimbursement
Subject 10	Unenthusiastic instructors
Subject 11	No problems; high level of service; process only took 2 wks
Subject 12	No problems; quick painless process
Subject 13	Time; lack of structure, deadlines
Subject 14	No problems; sessions well run, informative, fun; getting work done with other commitments; institution open, flexible, "always there to answer questions"
Subject 15	Institution didn't follow through; no procedure; felt ignored
Subject 16	Completing all assignments (at PLA centre?) in portfolio although not related to his challenge; difficulty writing learning narratives; very time consuming
Subject 17	Classmates who did not deserve to be there; one team member couldn't' have passed a high school course; perhaps someone else did his essay; later he was asked to leave and return when ready
Question 11:	**Did you benefit from PLA? If yes, in what ways? If no, why not?**
Subject 1	Should save time and money but doesn't know yet; no effect on present employment; essential for program she is hoping to take
Subject 2	Time and money; showed new opportunities
Subject 3	Time; promotion
Subject 4	Credit; faster completion; reflection on value of past experiences, drawing on them
Subject 5	Helpful in preparing resumes, selling herself in new career; information is all in one place, a valuable reminder of accomplishments; helped subject choose future courses; money
Subject 6	Pride, credit for skills; changed type of work (from things to people); time and $; changed his life
Subject 7	Validated her learning; employed in PLA; time and money
Subject 8	Self-confidence
Subject 9	Sense of accomplishment; celebrated high points of life with spouse; guarantees future promotion/employment
Subject 10	Learned about self; got credits; different opinion about self; new attitude toward PLAR

Subject 11	Time; earlier graduation-benefits career
Subject 12	Not taken advantage of PLA yet; unable to continue studying full-time for financial reasons; started a new business venture
Subject 13	Personal goal not professional-time
Subject 14	Saved money and time; job security (hopefully)
Subject 15	YES. Put life in perspective; has learned a lot/contributed a lot; boosted self-confidence, pride
Subject 16	YES. Realized lack of balance in his life; that alone worth while; advance in work; no financial benefit
Subject 17	Saved time; gave her a credential; increased job prospects and income by $20,000; helped achieve better balance in life-working 40 instead of 70 hours a week; couldn't have accessed program without PLA
Question 12:	**Have your feelings about all of your learning changed since going through PLA?**
Subject 1	Regularly takes courses "to blow rust and dust off'; "I guess I'm a lifelong learner"; gains personal satisfaction from learning; hesitant about using PLAR in university-program is highly competitive
Subject 2	Learning from workplace has realistic applications, meaningful; PLAR reinforced that learning; would look at courses in calendar differently now
Subject 3	Appreciation of integration of theory and practice; prefers to learn from doing; classroom instruction is removed from reality
Subject 4	Most valuable learning has been non-classroom-non-formal life exp
Subject 5	PLA exp confirmed her thoughts about learning; "learning happens everywhere"; it is as valid as learning in academic settings; exp learning was validated; important motivation; directly applicable; longer staying power
Subject 6	More confident in classroom; tries to make new learning relevant to past exp.; had become a "learning junkie"
Subject 7	PLA is good adult education practice; should be embedded in all courses for all students
Subject 8	PLAR is a legitimate process
Subject 9	Appreciate the exhilaration of learning; related was he was doing with what he was learning; non-formal learning very important.; should be more readily recognized; disconnect between education/industry-likes apprenticeship model
Subject 10	Attitude toward PLAR changed; wives who stay at home have learned so much that is important; educational institutions need to open minds to PLAR

Subject 11	YES. Didn't really understand before... use of portfolio for stuff that is not black and white.
Subject 12	Likes classroom-stimulating but mechanism necessary to account for work/life exp
Subject 13	Learning valuable both personally and academically; sensed from first assignment that university work was a no-brainer; PLAR/portfolio was NOT a no-brainer; demanding work; a lot of thinking
Subject 14	Before PLA thought (only) formal teaching/learning was credible; after realized how much learning happens outside the classroom, through life-increased appreciation for lifelong learning
Subject 15	Very much so; has learned a lot, contributed a lot
Subject 16	Degree won't mean as much; learned how to demonstrate what he learned from different experiences
Subject 17	YES. It only makes sense to people where they belong. Institutions lose credibility if they don't offer LA. PLA fits into the whole learner concept.

Question 13: What needs to be changed or added to improve PLA services?

Subject 1	They left me to find what would have been provided to a full-time student; easier if PLA counselling had been in person
Subject 2	Explore meaning of PLAR; broader orientation
Subject 3	Clear communication processes, clear policies, practices and standards; more interaction between industry and university; more recognition from employers of the importance of employees engaged in lifelong learning
Subject 4	Recognition; wider acceptance, wider use
Subject 5	Know what assessors are looking for; make greater effort to let people know it exists
Subject 6	Don't offer PLA unless institution is ready; know what is good PLA – challenge tests and exams not good ways of assessing knowledge
Subject 7	Pre-assessments; more accessibility; accrediting bodies should be involved; PLA officers; educate faculty; advertise PLA to students; market to industry
Subject 8	Failure to publicize PLAR
Subject 9	PLA engrained more in industry; industry/education work together more closely
Subject 10	Educational institutions need to open their minds to PLAR; great promotion and support in subject's case but resources for PLAR reduced over past few years
Subject 11	Nothing
Subject 12	Nothing

Subject 13	Better guidelines; how to book not useful; most communication due to lack of clarity: how to submit, where to submit, when required, how credits awarded, what to do when documentation/examples missing
Subject 14	Process not well know-publicize/promote; PLAR needs to be recognized, appreciated, respected; institution could be more realistic/relaxed-less intimidating-present process in less intimidating way
Subject 15	Procedures; follow through; honesty and respect for participants
Subject 16	Support of facilitator; better link between university and PLA centre; clear guidelines
Subject 17	Quality control
Question 14:	**If you were asked to meet with PLA learners coming in for the first time, what advice would you give them?**
Subject 1	Advise anyone to make use of PLAR. Find person like (course coordinator). It will save time and money
Subject 3	Develop a map towards degree; who where you are, where you want to be; set clear timelines; plan each step: what are the core competencies of each course? What are your personal interests? What is your availability? Are you motivated to study alone? At a distance? How will you prevent burnout?
Subject 4	Take the initial workshop
Subject 5	Assess whether you are a good candidate; if you haven't been learning... you can't make them up"; assess how you will demonstrate learning; would encourage people to do it; its really worthwhile... maybe not when you're 20 but in 30s...
Subject 6	Make sure they now what PLA is; look at inventory of learning; if you have learning, why take the course? Its not the easy way out but saves time
Subject 7	Look through calendar; determine what you know/don't know. Reflect on prior learning, background, skills. Do learning inventories: knowledge, skills, judgement. Find ways to prove learning
Subject 8	Advises anyone who asks to explore it
Subject 9	"go for it"; "have faith" "It is always darkest just before the dawn" "persistence pays off"; orientation and understanding of PLA is key; PLA coordinator plays key role; educational institutions should do more to recognize those who do not have post-secondary
Subject 10	Would recommend it; should be part of life... high school students should create portfolio
Subject 11	Keep your records/documentation; very valuable for people who have worked fulltime for awhile, taking courses; important to build effective portfolio about courses & work

Subject 12	Document experiences: work history, training, in as detailed a way as possible; doing PLA depends on relevance of work exp to course of study undertaken; if an easy fit, document everything, contact coordinator, get process going. Have references. General, practical experience hard to document.
Subject 13	She would offer herself as a resource. Be clear. She would help learner improve feedback on specific submissions-there is a tendency to make broad general statements; she got support-without that support she would still be working on it
Subject 14	Absolutely. Go through with it-not as intimidating as it first appears. Open mind as much as possible: "force yourself to think outside of formal educational experiences"; take time to reflect; don't rush
Subject 15	This is not 3 hrs/wk-a lot of work; mentally challenging; they will want to throw in the towel, tell them "Don't Dare"; at end thoroughly pleased; they will find they can place a different value on themselves; increase self-respect, pride-feel they can do anything they set their minds to; get support from people who have gone through it
Subject 16	Don't short change yourself; tell them to give it time; stop and think about it; keep up with assignments; make revisions – do a draft – get it down on paper; learn from others
Subject 17	Know exactly what you want out of the process; be prepared to be assertive; keep documentation of everything regardless of whether you think you will use it someday; get support of PLA coordinator

Question 15: How do you think others feel about PLA?

Subject 1	no one knows anything about PLAR or understand. I explain to them about "shortcuts" and "free credits". Her family and friends, when informed about her use of PLAR, and the free credits, all said "go for it!!". This is wonderful. No sense of getting a lesser education.
Subject 2	has not encountered negative attitudes but lack of knowledge. They didn't know about it and couldn't relate to it. Didn't even ask. Husband though it was good. Gets a pretty positive reaction-positive about exemptions.
Subject 3	talked about issues / process with work colleagues; got materials from Canadian Association of Logistics Management.
Subject 4	some don't consider it really valid-unless you've written an exam and received credit from a particular course its not equivalent. Those who understand PLA, are educated about it, feel its is valid and equivalent. People who recognize life experiences are more inclined to recognize PLAR' 5 validity. People in specific subject areas/disciplines less inclined-like to have control over learning and evaluation

Subject 5	Friend, professor at Ryerson never heard of PLA thinks it a great idea. People think it makes sense-a logical approach. People she went to for documentation all supportive.
Subject 6	for some it is important to go to class; but bored with classes where they already know the material
Subject 7	friends/family don't know what PLA is; don't understand what she does; aren't interested. Students/colleagues very interested; want to know how its done; group of teachers in public school very suspicious-reluctant and resistant: "Why should someone get PLA credit when they had to go through the whole course/program?"
Subject 8	never encountered negative attitudes to his use of PLAR or of PLAR in general among friends and acquaintances. Anyone who knew about it supported it. Wife with two advanced degrees enthusiastic.
Subject 9	knows one acquaintance close to finishing a certification through PLA and wife of colleague at work in process. Believes their experience positive-they are well aware of what they are doing and ready for commitment; have support of others to do it successfully.
Subject 10	Lot of people don't believe it is real. People with Education resent that you can do it "as easily as you have, that you haven't spent the time in the classroom. The don't believe it is a real credit. I don't believe that. Where I learn what I know, I still learned it. Those people who graduate from university don't believe it is a real credit. Universities will be the ones who will go down kicking and screaming before they will accept it. If numbers of students decline PLAR will have a chance. Yeah I think they see it as an equivalency rather than the real thing. I have a grade 12 equivalency so I say I have Grade 12. Other people deny that, and say it is only an equivalency. People with a higher level of education like to clarify. We have a lot of engineers. That's the way they behave.
Subject 11	I don 't think it is widely known. I have mentioned it to some fellow students and they didn't know about it. They tended to be surprised. There is another fellow in the same program, from the military and he then went through the PLA process. He received a couple of credit hours. He came after and thanked me. Wayne thinks more than just word of mouth is needed. It is one of those new things... seems a little odd at first, not widely accepted yet.
Subject 12	talked to family and friends. One person considered coming back to university but doesn't know if she tried to do PLA. At this institution it isn't available. Others in similar situation were a little nervous, reticent as to whether they could go to school. Not a lot of awareness. When he applied there was an article in university newspaper. It wouldn't benefit anyone outside. Advantageous to have reference to PLA in general media. Wasn't sure university wanted to push it or keep to themselves.

Subject 13 When I talk to people, even well educated people, about my use of PLAR, they think it's great. I have never experienced any negative response to it. I think maybe I have a fortunate group of friends and colleagues. They recognize just the time and effort it takes to be in school, especially through distance Ed. And my friends are all HR people, touchy feely, intuitive people. That may have something to do with their reaction. We have had conversations, but never condescension. The value for me has been people saying that's great. It validates your learning at work. That's great. A couple of friends have said that they wished they had had that opportunity. I don't distinguish between the two. If someone wants to give me credit for what I have done with my life, that seems to me be great. Perhaps my experience with Education makes the difference. I dropped out of school at 16 - what I was learning didn't seem very practical or useful, and returned when I was 20.1 understood what educations meant. But learning for me was not just based on the books. The distance learning model is perfect for me. I don't have to jump through too many hoops. I chose to pursue this degree because all my friends have degrees. The have never ever treated me differently because of that, but I just wanted to prove to myself that I could do it. Grades matter to me personally, but not professionally.

Subject 14 people don't know about it-once they learn about it response is positive. It could be a very worthwhile experience for so many people who don't know it's here.

Subject 15 without exception, everyone I know is happy that they did it. Personally beneficial for all

Subject 16 very few people seem to know about PLA - in my work we spend a lot of time and $$ on training and development - would be worthwhile spending time and $$ on this - any organization trying to identify high-potential employees would benefit -if they went through this program could identify for themselves what they want, where they get the most satisfaction, what motivates them, how they work - then would be more in control of their own future - organizations identify high potential people but don't ask them what they want, and if they don't want it, little point in training for advancement. Any organization would benefit from their employees going through this - e.g. someone who is simply in the wrong job. If people do have aspirations then this will help them determine what hurdles need to be cleared in order to get to where they want to go.

Subject 17 Family and friends very proud to see subject recognized; colleagues-some thinks its great, others think it diminishes their own education; the key was having the piece of paper that was the same as everyone elses

Question 16: Has PLA affected your personal life? If yes, how?

Subject 1 discovered a new way to do things through PLAR; feels good; getting feed back boosted self-esteem;

Subject 2	no longer feels like a high school drop-out; enjoys prestige of university degree; demonstrated importance of higher education to his teenagers; now understands why father so disappointed when he decided not to pursue higher ed; recognizes family sacrifices for him to achieve degree-grateful for support.
Subject 3	gave me much more confidence; effort into learning things has payback; helping others; feel better about myself It makes a difference
Subject 4	qualified him for certificate; gained credentials to instruct; PLA a factor for him to be chose to work as commercial aviation instructor; considered the hours and experience in his portfolio equivalent to required license.
Subject 5	enthusiasm for finishing degree; husband really impressed
Subject 6	gained pride; changed from working with sheet metal to working with people; more confident learner
Subject 7	increased self-esteem; validated for what she knows and can do; professionally very good
Subject 8	gained a good deal of self-confidence
Subject 9	lived away from home during his studies; did not participate in social activities; lifestyle change-given up drinking; gained self worth and self esteem
Subject 10	more satisfied with what I have done with my life-portfolio is tangible
Subject 11	a real sense of accomplishment
Subject 12	encouraged him to continue; feeling he could do it. Wasn't great student in grade school and in back of his mind thought he'd be back to square one-but it has been positive.
Subject 13	distance learning model is perfect for her. Chose to pursue degree because all her friends have one; wanted to prove to self she could do it; grades matter personally not professionally; there is not distinction between what she has learned and what has been taught.
Subject 14	admission to program; no time for life. Reinforced importance of learning; greater confidence.
Subject 15	puts life into perspective; boosts self-confidence; gives you pride
Subject 16	balance-realized he had no separation between work and home; getting balance back
Subject 17	Removed the barriers; I know I could take any program that I wanted and the validation; none of my family have gone for PLA though they know the process

Question 17: What kinds of costs were involved in your assessment?

Subject 1	not a lot of money compared to full cost of completing program; $50 registration fee; $100 (?)PLAR fee for each course challenged. Incidental costs like phone calls.
Subject 2	no costs in assessment; no assessment, admin or counselling fees
Subject 3	workplace paid all fees; odd baby-sitter fees
Subject 4	doesn't remember the exact cost; $75 for portfolio evaluation (?); cost of workshops --$75 per ½ day workshop
Subject 5	incidental costs for putting together portfolio; there was to have been a flat fee for assessment and then a cost per credit; still less than taking each course. She paid only $400 flat fee. Would have done PLA anyway.
Subject 6	not as expensive as taking the course: $300. Challenge at one institution cost $50. At other institution challenge is 50% of course cost.
Subject 7	½ cost of tuition; she didn't pay-part of pilot project
Subject 8	couldn't remember any costs-registration, assessment or course (this was demonstration project financed by COU everything was waived)
Subject 9	cost of challenges ranged from $50 to $100+ per course. Delay from institution meant employer couldn't reimburse
Subject 10	no cost; *$50* review of portfolio paid for by employer
Subject 11	no costs/fees; travel time
Subject 12	no fees; didn't miss work
Subject 13	thinks she paid $250 for 27 credits; would have had to pay 9 x *$425;* it never occurred to me. It wasn't about the money
Subject 14	none; only time-small price to pay
Subject 15	none in terms of money – time and frustration
Subject 16	none
Subject 17	Costs part of application fee; thinks they were $150 or *$50;* can't remember; if application had been more difficult won't have done it

Question 18: How did these costs affect you?

Subject 1	reimbursed 75% by employer-after some argument n/a
Subject 2	n/a
Subject 4	not at all; cost not factor in decision to undertake PLA
Subject 5	always hard to pay $400 in lump sum; no tax benefit-not considered part of tuition
Subject 7	because of PLA only needed to take one year off work for 2 year program-greatly benefited family income.

Subject 9	made up loss (no employer reimbursements) through travel reimbursement
Subject 11	all courses subsidized through military
Subject 13	it wasn't about money
Subject 14	financial piece covered through work
Subject 15	if able to complete degree increased remuneration
Subject 16	n/a
Subject 17	N/a; already fit profile-was prepared to pay registration fee

Question 19: If you had an opportunity to undertake PLA again, would you do it? Could you explain why?

Subject 1	her focus is not PLA but finishing program; PLA not the most important aspect of the process. No sense of "second-rate" or "on the cheap" education; has no reservations about her use of PLAR
Subject 2	would depend; would review structure of PLAR program given his "positive but frustrating" experience. Feels that knowing the ropes; how to behave and what faculty were looking for would seriously consider it and would likely be successful.
Subject 4	yes. Very valuable-preaches about it; really believes in it; has a lot of applications
Subject 5	absolutely. There would have to be a carrot attached.
Subject 6	Definitely. Values his learning; classroom not only way/ place to learn. Sometimes every day learning more valuable
Subject 7	yes. A personal challenge. Interested in using PLA to get into a Masters level program for which she doesn't have prerequisite degree.
Subject 9	He would do it again in a heart beat without hesitation. He found the whole experience exciting, exhilarating and the friendship with one of the PLA facilitators which developed rewarding.
Subject 10	I would certainly use it again.
Subject 11	Yes. Wants to pursue Arts degree will be looking for opportunities to use PLA in that process.
Subject 12	Yes, absolutely. Is it possible? Thought it a one shot deal. He would certainly consider it.
Subject 13	can't write an additional portfolio (for this program)
Subject 14	would certainly do it again. Once you have the portfolio, you can add to it-I keep mine up to date-if I wanted another career or something would be open to more PLA-my first experiences was so positive
Subject 15	It is something I would do again-would be fun to do again.

Subject 16 Yes, would take again-if considering a career change this is beneficial in helping you present yourself in the best way.

Subject 17 Yes. Education is not linear-not if you factor in personal and workplace learning. I'm not going for a Pill) yet. I would be more likely to take something like computers where I will need PLA

Question 20: Is there anything else you would like to add about your PLA experience?

Subject 1 still wonders what she might have missed by not doing undergraduate work

Subject 2 interviewee feels strongly that PLAR is necessary for mid-career professional to achieve degree; compressed time is crucial; not more than a third of any degree should be achieved through PLAR; standards must be clearly set and articulated

Subject 4 I enjoyed associating with people in workshops; following up on the process with them and keeping in touch after program over.

Subject 8 When asked if PLAR credits should be displayed on a transcript, he believes that employers might value it and make proper use of it, but he is sceptical of the attitudes of post-secondary agencies. In general he thinks there should be no indication of PLAR officially. He was asked a hypothetical question involving two potential employees for one position. Each has comparable educational qualifications. One has made use of PLAR, the other has not. Which would he choose and why? He said that he would look first at what credits the PLAR user had challenged. For him, it is the attitude to learning that is important, rather than the registered results. He would want to know whether the challenges had been in the areas most related to the demands of the position. That would tell him that the candidate had wished to learn, on his own, knowledge important to doing the job. "PLAR gives a post-facto indication of the willingness to learn. Back door, rubber hits the road, kind of learning." His eyes were opened by his experience with PLAR

Subject 10 Took me 24 years to learn what others could learn in school because they could afford it. they seem to think that their Education is more tangible, more real, because they spent an identifiable block of time doing it. (School years). When you do PLAR you can't put parameters around it. No specific time in the classroom, no exams. I would rather have gone to school when I was young, but it just wasn't in the cards. Would rather have chosen a field to be employed in, rather than working and trying to fit school to the employment. I don't think that we as young people had the choices that the young people have today. They have far more to choose from than we did. Far more educational choices. But I wouldn't have learned much of what I did. Not saying I am disappointed. I would rather have had those choices. Didn't much miss the collegiality - I get that from being employed. Especially when we were all going to school as

employees of.... I don't want to go to school with hundreds of students. I found some of the courses I took a night, that had regular students, a nuisance. No feeling of having got a certificate the easy way. The portfolio was a lot of work. I will probably go back to it.

Subject 11 I have read more literature on it this year. Good to reduce the cost of education, redundancy. It makes so much sense. It will save a lot; people will be more motivated, on the job or going to school part time. They can see they are going to get something more out of it. Awareness of the program: More emphasis in the calendar or briefings once in awhile. Some of the professors here taking a few minutes before or after class and just talking about general administration points My history professor would do that before each class, housekeeping points. One of the students commented that if she didn't tell them this stuff where would they find out? Some don't take the time to read literature.

Subject 12 It would be nice to have more documentation as to how the program works the criteria required for assessing prior learning. He really didn't get that very much when he went through it. How did they measure his prior learning? His initial meeting was a very general orientation as opposed to detailing what the processes might be. That type of information would he/p someone tailor their application to meet those requirements. If people were more aware of the PLA process it may serve as a catalyst for them to pursue more studies.

Subject 13 I would certainly help any one else with the process. I learned, maybe not the best way, but I certainly learned and know how important help is in writing a portfolio.

Subject 14 Really I just can't say enough good about it. It was a worthwhile use of time, I got an excellent product at the end, it gave me exactly what I was looking for, and it's given me something to keep and build and change as needed. Some great people in the class that because of school now I see every week (all were in the portfolio group for the same reason). It was flexible, always could get an answer to a question and an immediate answer - support staff were excellent - nothing negative that I have to say about the experience at all.

Subject 16 link with the school should be worked on; something that many people would benefit from, even if happy with what they are doing; can help employee in determining direction for self; can help manager build a team of people with different and complimentary skill sets; Going through it would help managers and academics in understanding what can be drawn out from a person's experience -brings something extra to the forefront - academics not used to thinking in this way.

Subject 17 I'm kind of in a different situation. Seeing how much work goes into a portfolio, I don't think I would have done it; I don't think I would have had the confidence

Appendix4:
Demographic Information Table

Demographic Information Table

Subject	Educational Agency	Gender	Age	Student Status	Employment Status	Program of Study
1	University/ College	F	35 – 39	Part – Time	Full – Time	Bachelor of Science
2	University	M	45 – 49	Part – Time	Full – Time	Bachelor of Arts
3	College	F	40 –44	Part – Time	Full –Time	Certificate in Adult Education Facilitation
4	University	M	55 – 59	Part – Time	Part – Time	Certificate in Adult & Continuing Education
5	University	F	45 – 49	Part – Time	Full – Time	Bachelor of Professional Arts
6	University	M	45 – 49	Part – Time	Full – Time	Certificate in Adult & Continuing Education
7	University	F	40 – 44	Part – Time	Full – Time	Bachelor of Arts
8	University	M	45 – 49	Part – Time	Full – Time	Bachelor of Professional Arts
9	College	M	45 – 49	Part – Time	Full – Time	Information Technology Diploma
10	College	F	45 – 49	Part – Time	Full – Time	Diploma in Business
11	University	M	30 – 34	Full – Time	Full – Time	Bachelor of Arts/Education
12	University	M	45 – 49	Part – Time	Full – Time	Bachelor of Arts
13	University	F	35 – 39	Part –Time	Full – Time	Bachelor of Professional Arts
14	University	F	40 – 44	N/A	Full – Time	Masters in Public Administration
15	University	F	50 – 54	N/A	Part –Time	Bachelor of Tourism and Hospitality Management
16	University	M	40 – 44	Full – Time	Full – Time	Masters in Public Administration
17	University	F	30 – 34	Full – Time	Full – Time	Master of Business Administration

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